

**Archives as Sites for Opening the Future of History**

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I understand archives as laboratories of historiography, as sites for the practice and production of history. Implicit within this statement is the view that history is continually being written, reevaluated, and re-written. Only by assembling and reassembling the fragments of history as evidenced in records do historians write the past. As McKemmish et al. (2005) suggest, records are always in a state of becoming; once they are placed in an archive, they are not fixed, static units of information. Instead, records are perpetually engaging with new systems of organization, indexed by expanding information resources, and undergoing reexamination by new perspectives and technologies (McKemmish et al., 2005). Thus, archives must design for malleability of collections usage and for dynamic categorization by facilitating associative, relational discovery. By grouping materials into larger collections rather than itemizing individual documents, the viewer of the archive engages with an entire box or folder of materials rather than plucking preselected items. Arranging archival materials in this way facilitates the process of identifying latent potentialities for future researchers and archivists by not drawing barriers between materials based on contemporary biases. The future of history is thus left open.

Carminati's 2019 study of the Egyptian National Archives highlights the ways in which archives "shape the historically thinkable and politically utterable" (p. 36). The processes by which documents are collected, described, organized, accessed, and reproduced for research into Egyptian history circumscribe the questions that historians are able to even imagine (Carminati, 2019). Thus, archives can be tools for political ends by facilitating historical revision, whether for progressive or suppressive aims. How archivists develop collections, make resources accessible, and facilitate inquiry through organization and description significantly influences the production of history.

Archivists must acknowledge and work with the inherent limitations of representing the pasts of individuals, groups, and organizations. Skeeahan (2018) likens the archival historical research process to peeping between the gaps or spying on the fragments of a person's life or a group's past activities; historians and archivists can never grasp the totality and complexity of a life or communities past, only build narratives out of the salvaged remains. Thus, Skeeahan advocates for queering the archive, proposing that archivists should embrace the fragmentary and often unknowable qualities of a collection's subject (2018). Archivists with a heightened awareness of this inability to wholly capture a fixed, determined meaning behind a collection's subject are able to better create space for collections to continually develop, change, and not become overly-fixed in their significance (Skeeahan, 2018).

I advocate for thoughtfully administered community-driven collections acquisition and post-custodial management models. While bringing self-awareness to collections development, description, and management is certainly crucial to the archivist's role, incorporating relevant community stakeholders' input is necessary for balanced, holistic representation. Archivists can easily be blinded by professional norms and thus easily overlook materials and descriptive processes that create a more inclusive collection. Traditional archival notions of document authenticity, reliability, and authority are defined by historically-contingent evidentiary paradigms within the profession (McKemmish et al., 2005); thus, collaborative community-driven acquisition and description work balances professional know-how with relevant community perspectives and sentiments. If the archive is a site from which history emerges, or as Derrida suggests, the "origin of authority" (1996, p. 1), archivists must consider the ethical implications of representing communities to which they, and the institutions they work for, do not belong. If "there is no political authority without control of the archive" (Derrida, 1996, p. 4), then archives that better represent

relevant community voices create the conditions of possibility for greater political agency within these communities. Collections have the potential to shape, complicate, or affirm individual and community self-knowledge (Bundsgaard, 2006). Thus, the archive is not a politically neutral actor, but an entity that enters into dialogic relationships with the communities from which they acquire collections.

Professionally, I aim to hold both the traditional role of archivist as conservator and curator of historical resources while also implementing structural and procedural reforms that further create space for unknown future uses and interpretations of collections, even ones that may undermine my original understanding of the materials. As an archivist and a mediator of historical research (Marquis, 2006), I facilitate the record's process of continual-becoming by adding ever-broadening layers of contextual metadata, integrating relevant community input, decreasing barriers to access, and striving to put collections to use under new analytical lenses.

### References

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